

What is claimed is:

1. A multi-vendor internet commerce system (MV-ICS) for efficiently enabling e-commerce through the Internet for a plurality of vendors having vendor-sites and a plurality of consumers being in contact with the vendor-sites, the system comprising:

5 a centrally implemented multi-vendor central processing unit (MV-CPU) that acts as a shared processing location for the plurality of vendors;

a centrally implemented multi-vendor shared datastore (MV-SD) that acts cooperatively with the MV-CPU and serves as a shared datastore for the plurality of vendors;

10 at least one vendor-site I/O module that is used by at least one of the plurality of vendors to interface with the MV-CPU and MV-SD;

at least one consumer-interface I/O module that is used by at least one consumer to interface with the MV-CPU and MV-SD,

15 wherein the MV-SD relieves individual vendor websites from the burden of setting up and maintaining at least a portion of certain facilities contained on the MV-SD, and the MV-CPU ensures that appropriate communication occurs between each vendor website and the MV-SD.

20 2. The multi-vendor Internet commerce system of Claim 1, wherein implementation of certain facilities and other shared resources on the MV-SD is substantially transparent to the consumer contacting the MV-ICS.

3. The multi-vendor Internet commerce system of Claim 1, wherein vendors who are otherwise unrelated or unknown to each other share the Internet commerce system.

4. The multi-vendor Internet commerce system of Claim 1, wherein the MV-CPU and the MV-SD are located at the same central location.

5. The multi-vendor Internet commerce system of Claim 1, wherein the MV-CPU and the MV-SD are dispersed among multiple sites that are interconnected through a network connection that includes the Internet.

6. The multi-vendor Internet commerce system of Claim 1, wherein the MV-SD includes at least a consumer database, which tracks consumer profiles on behalf of the plurality of participating vendor websites.

7. The multi-vendor Internet commerce system of Claim 6, wherein the consumer profile includes a universal, cross-vendor shopping cart into which items selected from a plurality of vendors may be deposited.

8. The multi-vendor Internet commerce system of Claim 1, wherein the MV-SD includes at least a vendor database, which tracks the participating vendor profiles and their websites.

9. The multi-vendor Internet commerce system of Claim 1, wherein MV-SD includes at least a product database representing a database of products offered for sale by the participating vendors.

10. The multi-vendor Internet commerce system of Claim 9, wherein the product database includes catalog representations of the products offered for sale.

5 11. The multi-vendor Internet commerce system of Claim 1, wherein the MV-CPU includes gift registry logic for receiving items from various websites that have been selected by the consumers to be searchably placed into the various gift registries.

12. The multi-vendor Internet commerce system of Claim 1, wherein the MV-CPU includes shopping cart logic for receiving items from various websites that have been selected by the consumers to be placed into the universal shopping cart for viewing, adding, removing, or purchasing that item.

10 13. The multi-vendor Internet commerce system of Claim 1, wherein the MV-CPU includes sign-in logic for presenting the authentication page to the consumer and performing the authentication of known users or registration of new users.

15 14. The multi-vendor Internet commerce system of Claim 1, wherein the MV-CPU includes conveyance logic for communicating the information to each vendor about the items purchased from the vendor including at least the amount of the purchase and any shipping information.

20 15. A method for utilizing a multi-vendor internet commerce system (MV-ICS) that efficiently enables e-commerce through the Internet for a plurality of vendors having vendor-sites with offered items, and a plurality of consumers being in contact with the vendor-sites for acquiring those items, the system having a centrally implemented multi-vendor central processing unit (MV-CPU) that acts as a shared processing location for the
25 plurality of vendors, and a centrally implemented multi-vendor shared datastore (MV-SD)

that acts cooperatively with the MV-CPU and serves as a shared datastore for the plurality of vendors, the MV-SD including universal shopping cart logic, the method comprising:

receiving a command to invoke the universal shopping cart, along with a selected item description;

5 confirming if the consumer information is already obtained, and authenticating the consumer if not;

obtaining the universal shopping cart for the authenticated consumer from a consumer database associated with the MV-SD;

10 obtaining branding information pertaining to a selected item, for presentation in association with the universal shopping cart, from a vendor database associated with the MV-SD;

adding the selected item to the universal shopping cart;

presenting the universal shopping cart and its contents on a consumer Internet terminal device.

15 16. The method of Claim 15, which further includes:

inquiring whether the consumer wishes to return to browsing vendor items, or checkout;

if return to browsing, then go back to last displayed product page;

20 otherwise proceed to checkout.

17. The method of Claim 16, which further includes:

receiving a checkout command from the consumer while displaying the universal shopping cart at the consumer Internet terminal;

calculating the cost for each item selected for checkout from the universal shopping cart;

presenting an invoice to the consumer to obtain authorization and shipping data;

obtaining authorization from the consumer;

5 confirm is merchant is of record;

if yes, then charge the consumer and provide shipping data to the vendor;

if no, then provide both shipping data and payment data to the vendor.

18. The method of Claim 15, wherein the authenticating step includes:

(a) presenting authentication or sign-in page to the consumer Internet terminal;

(b) receiving authorization data from the consumer;

(c) inquire whether the consumer is new or old;

(d) if new, then providing a registration process for the consumer, and proceed to step (h);

15 (e) if old, then inquire whether the consumer is authenticated as registered in the consumer database;

(f) if consumer not authenticated, then return to step (a);

(g) if consumer is authenticated, then proceed to step (h);

(h) set cookie file associated with the consumer;

20 (i) obtain consumer data from the consumer database.

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